

From the Philippine Daily Inquirer

## **Crash underscores risks in RP-US anti-terror effort**

Posted: 6:54 PM (Manila Time) | Feb. 22, 2002  
By Agence France-Presse

A FIERY helicopter crash inflicted the first American casualties in a joint anti-terror operation in the Philippines on Friday, underscoring the risks faced by 660 US soldiers in the campaign, officials said.

The MH-47 helicopter with eight US airmen and two other American soldiers went down at sea after what witnesses described as a fiery explosion in midflight off the southern tip of the central island of Negros before dawn.

Rescuers have recovered three bodies. No survivors have been found so far.

The aircraft was en route to Mactan Air Base in the central city of Cebu from southern Basilan island, where US forces are helping to train their Filipino counterparts to combat Abu Sayyaf rebels linked to the al-Qaeda terror network.

Both the Pentagon and security experts here said it was unlikely hostile fire was involved.

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, expressing her sadness at the loss of American lives, told reporters: "This is proof that Americans also have risks to take. They knew the dangers in our fight against terrorism. There are really risks here."

Special operations airmen have been flying MH-47 "Chinook" aircraft to Basilan for a week to insert troops and equipment. Night flights there began on Monday.

Filipino security analyst Rex Robles said it was unlikely that hostile fire either from guerrillas or other groups had downed the helicopter.

"These aircraft operate without lights and it is very difficult to even see them in the dark," the retired navy intelligence officer who now runs a security consultancy told Agence France-Presse.

He said "night flying is very demanding," and suggested human mistakes could have contributed to the crash.

"Helicopters are essentially unsafe vehicles, much more unsafe than fixed-wing aircraft," Robles said. "Because of their design, they are convenient for quick reaction, but they are not very stable."

He did not think the US operation would be affected in any way.

"That's part of life from the point of view of the United States. Things like this happen."

The MH-47 aircraft is based on Boeing Co.'s CH-47 airframe, but configured for special operations missions.

US military spokespersons in the Philippines said the US contingent in Basilan was using two Chinook models.

The MH-47E is a heavy assault helicopter while the MH-47AWD is for search and rescue missions. It was not immediately known which model crashed.

Armed and authorized to fire in self-defense, 12-member "alpha teams" of US Special Forces have been assigned to observe and advise Filipino Army battalions in Basilan.

## **US helicopter crash raises questions of VFA violation**

Posted: 0:38 AM (Manila Time) | Feb. 23, 2002  
By Christine Avendaño and Juliet L. Javellana  
Inquirer News Service

DID the flight of the American MH-47 "Chinook" helicopter early Friday violate provisions of the Philippine-US Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA)? Some members of the House of Representatives pointed this out Friday, including Bayan Muna Representative Liza Masa who noted that there were no Filipino soldiers onboard the helicopter that crashed off the southern tip of the central-western island of Negros with 10 US servicemen onboard.

Three bodies have been recovered while seven remain missing, according to the latest reports from Philippine and American military officials overseeing the on-going "Balikatan 02-1" joint military exercise.

The training exercise began this week on Basilan island, the jungle-covered lair of the Abu Sayyaf bandits whom both the Philippine and US governments link to the al-Qada terrorist network.

"Is it allowed for them (US military) to fly on their own in our airspace? Shouldn't they have Filipino soldiers on that flight?" Masa said in a phone interview.

Department of Foreign Affairs officials said the US helicopter was on an "administrative" flight. The official said that the helicopter was on its way back to Mactan Air Base in the central-eastern island of Cebu where it was based.

# Crash victims honored; 8 belonged to elite force

Posted: 0:00 AM (Manila Time) | Feb. 24, 2002  
Inquirer News Service

## Scouring the sea

Three small Philippine Navy gunboats are scouring the turquoise waters of the Bohol Sea for the missing US servicemen while a search helicopter is checking nearby beaches. Local fishermen have also joined in the search.

"We haven't even seen debris," an officer aboard the Philippine Navy Gunboat 370 said. He has been glued to his binoculars the whole day yesterday. "But we will stay out here day and night until we do."

The officer, who did not want to be named, said his boat lacked radar and his two divers were not much use in the deep waters and swift currents off Apo, a 13-hectare tourist island between Negros Oriental and Siquijor.

Chances of finding anyone alive were shrinking by the hour. Still, officials weren't ready to give up.

"We should not rule out a miracle," said Lt. Gen. Roy Cimatu, commander of the Southern Command. "People can stay in the water for about one week, so we must not abandon the rescue. The fight is against time."

Brig. Gen. Marcial Ilagan, head of the search and rescue task force, was also optimistic. "We are hopeful they are still alive."

Sgt. Michael Farris, spokesperson for the US contingent, added: "We still cannot presume that the others are already dead. We are still hopeful that they were rescued by fishermen after the accident."

The Americans are carrying out their own retrieval efforts without Philippine help, according to Cimatu.

He said the helicopter's emergency beacon was believed to be about 200 meters under water. Parts of the sea floor in the area are 400 meters or more deep, according to local residents.

The MH-47E military helicopter crashed about 2:30 a.m. Friday while heading back to its temporary base in Cebu.

The Chinook had just completed a series of night flying sorties, ferrying US Green Berets and supplies from Zamboanga City to nearby Basilan island.

## **Cause of crash**

The cause of the crash is unknown, but early suspicions focused on mechanical failure. The Philippine military has ruled out hostile fire.

Charito Tabanera, 37, said he was fishing when he saw the helicopter go down. "I saw a fireball and it fell into the sea."

Tabanera said the wind was so strong and the waters so choppy that he couldn't head in the direction of the crash. Other fishermen said they thought they had seen a meteorite.

The search for the missing amounts mostly to looking at the water surface, scanning beaches from the air and talking to local fishermen for reports of debris sightings among the coral, rocks and white sands of the region sprinkled with hilly, palm-studded islets.

The gunboats and a Coast Guard patrol boat have so far found a rotor, a fuse box, the fuselage, a pilot's helmet, a seat and the landing gear.

Fishermen and beachcombers have assembled a collection of parts found floating in the waters. A metal box full of hydraulic fluid, a first-aid kit, a diving boot, part of a rotor blade and a package of American "meals-ready-to-eat" were either floating near the shore or washed up on the beach.

The task ahead, searchers say, has been made increasingly difficult as powerful currents and tides can shift wreckage for kilometers overnight.

## **CHINOOK CRASH**

# **Rescuers give up hope of finding survivors**

Posted: 0:50 AM (Manila Time) | Feb. 25, 2002

By Alex Pal  
Inquirer News Service

## **Effort shifts towards recovery**

ZAMBOANGUITA, Negros Oriental-- The US military on Sunday gave up hope of finding survivors among the 10 American servicemen aboard an MH-47 Chinook helicopter that crashed three days ago in a ball of fire into the Bohol Strait, a few kilometers from this coastal town.

"Based on our best assessment of the extensive efforts by the Philippine and US search and rescue teams, we have determined that there is no chance that we will find survivors," Brig. Gen. Donald Wurster said in Zamboanga City.

Wurster, head of the US military contingent involved in the Balikatan 02-1 joint training exercise, said the rescue effort had shifted to a recovery mission.

A day earlier, officials were still hoping for a "miracle" because the eight-man crew from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and two Air Force para-rescuers on board the helicopter were all trained in water survival.

The MH-47E Chinook went down 2:30 a.m. Friday after ferrying supplies and US Green Berets from Zamboanga City to nearby Basilan island.

The helicopter was flying in tandem with another Chinook en route from Zamboanga City to the Mactan Air Base near Cebu City.

Witnesses reported the helicopter was on fire as it fell into the sea and exploded on impact with the water. American and Philippine military officials have ruled out hostile fire as the cause of the crash.

"We have reached a difficult but necessary point in the ongoing search where we must transition from search-and-rescue operations to search-and-recovery operations," Wurster told a news conference at the headquarters of the Southern Command.

"We will do everything possible to retrieve additional items and any human remains from the search area.

"Although we have lost 10 good men--eight from the Army and two from the Air Force--we will continue with our mission. We are here to conduct a mission that the presidents of the Philippines and the United States committed to--working together to help counter terrorism in the Philippines."

Rescuers on board an outrigger Sunday threw yellow and red roses into the sea. A priest offered prayers while villagers lit candles at the pier.

"They gave the ultimate sacrifice. I hope you keep them in your minds and in your hearts," American M/Sgt. Mike Farris told rescuers and villagers who turned up at the unplanned but solemn memorial service.

### **Investigating team dispatched**

Wurster said all items recovered would be handed to a US Army investigation team that has been dispatched from Fort Rucker, Alabama, to find out what went wrong. He said the team would work closely with local officials.

Wurster said a memorial would be held Tuesday in Cebu. No decision has been made on whether to salvage the wreckage because of the depth of the waters into which the helicopter crashed.

The Chinook was among three here for the exercise, and Wurster said he expected a

replacement would be brought in.

A 660-strong US military force arrived last month for the counter-terrorism training exercise aimed at helping the Philippine military wipe out the Abu Sayyaf bandits who have been linked to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terror network.

The Abu Sayyaf has been holding an American missionary couple and a Filipino nurse for nearly nine months in the dense jungles of Basilan. The three are the last of nearly 100 hostages snatched since last May.

More than 200 rescue workers have shifted the search to 190 km from the crash site as debris reached the open sea and dispersed in strong currents and brisk southeasterly winds, officials said Sunday.

Air Force Brig. Gen. Marciano Ilagan, head of Task Force Tulungan that is coordinating the search for the missing US servicemen, said rescue forces had covered 2,880 square km of ocean and coast.

Involved in the operations are 10 US Navy SEALs, seven US Army personnel, a P-3 Orion surveillance plane and a US C-130 transport plane.

At least three bodies have been recovered by the around-the-clock search that also includes three Philippine Navy ships, a Coast Guard vessel, six helicopters and nine motorized outriggers.

## **75 US soldiers honor dead comrades in Chinook crash**

Posted: 0:50 AM (Manila Time) | Feb. 27, 2002  
By Connie E. Fernandez  
Inquirer News Service

### **Gaps in ranks**

MACTAN ISLAND, Cebu--Many had tears in their eyes.

Some 75 American servicemen--with 10 gaps in their ranks--and 30 Filipino soldiers stood in formation Tuesday at the Benito Ebuena Air Base in Lapu-Lapu City under a rapidly setting tropical sun to honor the 10 Americans who perished in the Chinook crash on Friday.

Behind them were a C-130 plane and an MH-47E helicopter, nearly identical to the one that crashed in the waters off Zamboanguita town in Negros Oriental.

"Their deaths remind us that the fight against the enemies of peace and security comes at a cost," Armed Forces Chief of Staff Gen. Diomedio Villanueva said while posthumously awarding the 10 men with the Bronze Star, the country's highest peacetime medal.

Villanueva called them "heroes," citing their "extraordinary and distinguished service rendered as members of the US Forces" participating in the RP-US Balikatan military exercise.

The 15-minute tribute started with a memorial service inside the hangar, attended by more than 300 US soldiers and a 200-member Philippine contingent. Among those present were Executive Secretary Alberto Romulo, Sen. Ramon Magsaysay Jr., Cebu Gov. Pablo Garcia, US Charge d'Affaires Robert Fitts, and US Rear Adm. William Sullivan, chief of plans and programs at the US Pacific Command based in Hawaii.

"We share in the grief of their families and loved ones. We know that no words are enough to lighten their burden today," Villanueva said. "But let me assure them that they are indeed heroes. They died standing for a noble cause: of keeping the world free of people who do not believe in the rights of other peoples to live in harmony and freedom."

### **Moving ceremony**

After Villanueva's remarks, a moving ceremony followed, with 75 US servicemen in five units and 30 Filipino soldiers in two units standing in formation. Two of the units had gaps in the middle of their formation, representing the 10 men who died--Maj. Curtis Feistner, Capt. Bartt Owens, Chief Warrant Officer Jody Egnor, S/Sgt. Kerry Frith, S/Sgt. James Dorrity, S/Sgt. Bruce Rushforth Jr., Sgt. Jeremy Foshee, Sgt. Thomas Allison, M/Sgt. William McDaniel II and S/Sgt. Juan Ridout. The first eight were Army men based in Fort Campbell, Kentucky; the last two were para-rescuemen based in Japan.

After an introductory prayer, an officer of the US Army's Echo Company, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, reported that eight of the ir members were not present. An officer of the US Air Force's 320th Special Tactics Squadron also told the adjutant that two of their men were absent.

After the report, the assembled units honored the colors of both the Philippines and the United States while the Philippine Air Force band played the national anthems of both countries. Then the adjutant called the roll. The names of the 10 American servicemen who died in the accident were called out thrice. At one point, the adjutant's voice quavered while calling out the names. Then the band played "Taps." It has been the tradition of the US military since the American Civil War to play this song in honor of its servicemen who died in action.

The troops in the middle then moved to fill the gap left by their missing members. After the ranks had closed, the adjutant announced to the troops their order: to continue their mission in the Philippines to help in the fight against terrorism.

The order echoed a highlight of Villanueva's tribute, when he said: "These men left their homes for an important mission--to help a friend; these men died while fulfilling that mission."

A display in honor of the fallen American servicemen was also set up inside the hangar. The display was in the middle of 12 wreaths; 11 bore the names of the 10 servicemen and the number "47-1," tail-number of the ill-fated Chinook helicopter. The 12th wreath was also the biggest--an arrangement of white orchids--offered by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

The display consisted of an aviator's flight helmet with night-vision goggles mounted on an M-4 carbine rifle. On each side was a pair of boots and a beret, one belonging to the US Army and the other to the US Air Force. On the upper right hand was the banner of the "Night Stalkers," and the moniker of the US Air Force's 320th Special Tactics Squadron.